



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY

www.aa.lwvmd.org

**FOCUS GROUP #1
ON THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON AA COUNTY
February 5, 2009**

Participants

Members of Immigration Study Committee of League of Women Voters Anne Arundel County

Anne Nelson, Chair; Sue Farmer; Lois Fussell; Joyce Passos; Ruth Latimer; Myrna Siegel; Linda Teare; Cynthia Towle-Krewson

Representatives of County Public and Private Organizations

Schools [Lois & Sue]

Franklin R. Horstman, PhD
Acting County Coordinator of ESOL Programs

Carlesa Finney
Equity Assurance Office, County Public Schools

Health Care [Joyce]

Faye Anderson, Director
Annapolis Outreach Center

Evelyn Stein, Office of Health Disparity
Division Director, Health Information and Promotion
County Department of Health

Community Organization
[Anne]

Irene Zoppi, Director, Centro de Ayuda
Patricia Aghaly, Senior Case Worker, Centro de Ayuda

Church [Lois]

Mrs. Hillevi Flores
St. John Neumann Church

Crime [Anne]

Lt. William Powell
Community Relations Office
Annapolis Police Department

Joe Hudson
Police Liaison to Hispanic Community
Annapolis Police Department

Tony Vasquez, Pastor
Centro Cristiano Fuente de Vida
Bilingual Family & Community Outreach Facilitator
County Public Schools

Business [Linda]

Alicia Rodriguez, Principal Partner
Sophia Associates, an Executive Coaching & Leadership firm

Ruby Singleton Blakeney, Head of Minority Business
Development, Annapolis Economic Development Office

Social Services [Myrna]

John Lamb
Judy Williams
County Department of Social Services

Proceedings

Anne: Welcome all and thank you for helping us in our Study of the Impact of Immigration on the county. As a setting for our discussion, I would like to read a portion of the position of the national League of Women Voters on Immigration:

Unauthorized Immigrants already in the U.S.

In achieving overall policy goals, the League supports a system for unauthorized immigrants already in the country to earn legal status, including citizenship, by paying taxes, learning English, studying civics and meeting other relevant criteria...the League does not support deporting unauthorized immigrants who have no history of criminal activity.

The plan for our discussion is to ask each member of the Study Committee to pose a question to the panelists she has invited who function in her area of the study. The panelists will have five minutes to reply, then the question will be thrown open for five more minutes for comment by other panelists.

SCHOOLS Carlesa Finney of the County Public Schools and Dr. Franklin Horstman of ESOL programs were questioned by Lois Fussell and Sue Farmer of the Study Committee.

Question. "We know that the county is trying hard to build a more culturally proficient school system, yet there is a perception that ESOL students - and Hispanic students in particular - are not being absorbed culturally or academically. What more needs to be done?"

Finney: Last night (Feb. 3rd) was the second of a series of 10 Forums, sponsored by the Health Dept., Dept of Social Services and the County Education Dept. at Mills Parole School. It was well attended.

Horstman: Speaking to *absorbed*, there are some examples: 1) Students at the Forum last night from Glen Burnie High School played out how/why they should keep their culture; 2) Last night at the program at Broadneck, we learned that one of the students whose family has been in the U.S. for 25 years has been nominated to attend the Naval Academy; 3) At Annapolis high school, we have formed a Latino choir and band ensemble; 4) For students whose parents are without identification, the Dept. of Education has a plan to offer identification to students.

Finney: Public schools are not permitted to ask for students' legal/illegal status. Students may need to demonstrate residency for school assignments. This information is generally submitted by parents when students enroll. It does not include the need to submit immigrant status. This can be a financial challenge on areas with growing numbers of immigrant students because in most cases, schools are funded using property and other county and state tax revenue.

Horstman: Seventy-five per cent of 12th grade Hispanic students in Anne Arundel County graduated last year, but only 55 percent of all Hispanic (ESOL) students make it to the 12th grade.

Finney: What more do we need to do? Hispanic students who are undocumented may not be eligible to attend degree and credit programs. If they do have the appropriate documentation for admission, they more than likely will be required to pay out-of-state tuition at Anne Arundel Community College (AACC). Advocacy is needed on a local, state and federal level to change the system to allow students to pay in-state tuition. We need laws to help that. Now admission and tuition rates are determined school by school. Tuition is a real challenge. Financial aid has narrow eligibility. Pending federal legislation needs to liberalize post-high school admission to public higher education. AACC has many ESOL programs. Undocumented residents may be

eligible to register for English as a Second Language courses for personal enrichment and may be eligible to pay in-county registration and enrollment rates. There is a special need to coordinate and distribute information on the available programs.

HEALTH CARE Faye Anderson, Director of Annapolis Outreach Center, and Evelyn Stein of the County Health Dept. were questioned by Committee member Joyce Passos.

Question. "In your agency, what trends are you experiencing in the volume of immigrants presenting health problems, in the pattern of needs presented, and in the type of clinical service you provide?"

Stein: We provide services to preserve, protect, and promote health. We do not provide primary care, instead we do preventive care. The County Department of Health (DOH) provides health information and health promotion, including such services as immunizations and screening for breast and cervical cancer. Providers for screening services are private. Various kinds of residency proofs are required. The DOH does outreach to Hispanics and Koreans. Carlos Camino outreaches to the Hispanic community. DOH has outreach workers who give language facilitation so people can know what we are saying and they can ask questions. There is a Hispanic health line (410-222-4499) and a Hispanic home page on the aa.county.org website (AASALUD.ORG). DOH has a REACH program for uninsured adults whose income is $\leq 250\%$ of the poverty level. It is a sliding fee scale for service for adults. REACH is a partnership with County health providers and the DOH. The providers are paid at the time of service according to a fee scale based upon the person's household income. REACH is not considered an insurance plan and does not provide insurance coverage.

Each community group has its own profile. In the Hispanic community, the DOH has partnerships with a network of 27 community groups, including working with 24 churches.

DOH services to children are funded by Maryland Childrens Insurance Program (MCHIP). Many services provided by the DOH require that the agency must provide information clients can understand. The DOH uses a "language line" contract as well as interpreters to meet the language needs of clients.

The Anne Arundel County Mental Health Agency, Inc. provides a continuum of mental health services for eligible County residents. Details on services are available at www.aamentalhealth.org. Additionally, the Network of Care web site also provides information on resources in the County at www.networkofcare.org. The DOH provides outpatient mental health and addiction services to County children (5 to 18 years) and their families who are Medicaid eligible. More information is available at www.aahealth.org, click on Behavioral Health.

The DOH is not aware of the "Coalition for Mental Health."

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION Irene Zoppi, Director of Centro de Ayuda, and Patricia Aghaly, Senior Case Worker there, were questioned by Anne Nelson, Committee chairperson.

Question. "Are you getting to the people you most want to reach? Who comes and who does not? What do they most seek?"

Aghaly: The most difficult problem we deal with is health insurance. Thirty-four per cent (34%) have no health insurance, and they go to the emergency room. People born here do have health insurance. For children born here, Centro helps with forms. If individuals have no insurance, e.g., different workers such as people who work in fields etc., they go to the

emergency room. The REACH Program of the health department is very good, there is a fee of \$35, * the program serves 500 to 600 a month and it is growing. Only two case workers.

* Note: The REACH providers are paid at the time of service according to a fee scale based upon the person's household income. REACH is not considered an insurance plan and does not provide insurance coverage.

Zoppi: We don't have funding to expand, funding is from private donors. People fear that everyone we serve is illegal. The county cut us off. (Anne noted that Leopold gave \$14,000 on condition that they serve only legal immigrants and Centro turned it down.) People come because they want to learn English. We see all kinds of immigrants. *Ayuda* means *help*, the reason our clients come - because they need help. They want to be understood, to belong, to be loved. They want access to the U.S., but they want to keep their own culture. Mother Teresa said, "The poor do not need compassion. They need help."

Many immigrants now here came in response to U.S. government and businesses encouraging them to fill unfilled jobs.

Horstman: Federal law prohibits us from asking immigration status in the school system.

Flores: We get people in Venezuela who come for jobs. There are no restrictions on immigration, they're entitled to all services.

CHURCH Hellevi Flores, translator for Father Fabio, Pastor of St. John Neumann, was questioned by Lois Fussell, Committee member.

Question. "We know that churches are ministering to the spiritual needs of Hispanic immigrants as well as providing classes in English and tutoring for children. Do you see cultural clashes between American and Hispanic traditions? How can they be eased?"

Tony Valesquez: (turns out to be a lay minister for Assembly of God and has organized five churches in the county. He came late to the meeting and missed the Schools part, although he works at Board of Education, so he spoke up here.)

Yes there are clashes, language, culture. We have to teach both adults and children a new culture, how even to clean their houses. Parents don't know how to do things. Religious traditions. They are afraid because they don't understand what their rights are.

Flores: Language, everything, becomes a challenge. Some children don't have any school at all where they come from. We need to teach them. When a family may lose their house or job, they can't get help from institutions because no one there speaks Spanish. Seventy-eight per cent (78%) of the adults who immigrate here have had no school. They can't read their own language. In Glen Burnie, some immigrant children placed in grades 2 – 5 have had *no prior education*.

Zoppi: Gave example of an abused woman denied shelter because she could only speak Spanish.

Finney: Spanish-speaking students now constitute 3% of AACPS students. The percentages and numbers of Spanish-speaking students vary depending on the school. Annapolis High School has about a 15% ELL enrollment. Meade and Glen Burnie High Schools also have significant and growing ELL student enrollment. Next year they are expected to be 3.5% of the school population. The proportional increase in the number of ESOL students in the county this year over last year is 40%. Within two years, the proportion of Spanish-speaking students in Middle School will increase 40%. There are now 2,000 Spanish-speaking students in the city and 20,000 in the county.

CRIME Lt. William Powell, Community Relations Office of the Annapolis Police Dept. and Joe Hudson, Police Liaison to Hispanic Community, were questioned by Anne Nelson, Committee chairperson.

Question. "Does Anne Arundel County have Hispanic street gangs? If so, what happens to the young gang members as they become adults?"

Powell: We have potentially four different gangs we have identified. Don't know how they developed; they are not too developed. They run from ages 10 or 11 years old when they are recruited, and stay into their late 30s. They don't walk away from the gang, walking away is dangerous. There are more gangs in surrounding counties, especially Prince George's Co. Gangs are moving in from other areas. We need some training. Parents need to keep track of the children. Parents think that if they get them on the phone, they are all right.

Valesquez: Some of the gangs moved here from elsewhere. There's a real problem with "wannabe's."

Powell: Parents, schools and churches need training in what to look for as evidence of "gang danger." Gang tags, or signs, are now more visible than actual gangs.

Flores: We have not heard anything about gangs in AA County.

Hudson: Prince George's County also denied existence of gangs in their early stages.

Powell: You can see signs on telephones in different places. Children think gangs are cool. Prince George has much the same problem. Police are alive to the situation.

Hudson: Parents don't know about it. What to do about it? Give them hope for the future. We need more community organizers. (Hudson is a community organizer.) We have just started.

Blakeney: All our children need this, not just Hispanic children. We need programs to strengthen the family unit.

Finney: In one of our high schools in the county, anywhere from 30 – 40 students a day leave school for "parties" where negative influences abound. One of the reasons for the Hispanic Family Forums is to inform parents of the importance of school attendance, assist them in understanding the schooling processes and requirements and encourage them to become involved in their child's education, especially the middle and high school students.

Hudson: It took only 6 months from the time a group was identified before it was a full force gang.

Valesquez: We need to be pro-, not re-active. Kids need to be listened to, loved and in a strengthened family. We need to teach parents how to communicate with their children, especially how to listen.

BUSINESS Committee member Linda Teare reported an interview with Alicia Rodriguez, small business owner who provides executive coaching for people already in some leadership positions, and also introduced Ruby Singleton Blakeney, head of Minority Business Development in Annapolis' Economic Development Office.

Teare's report from Alicia Rodriguez.

Question. Are there tensions between Black and Hispanic communities?

There are definitely tensions among Blacks, Whites and Hispanics. She tries to teach how to handle prejudice when it is encountered. Her strategy is use of constructive conflict, whose basic tool is *inquiry*. Never ask WHY. Ask what were you thinking when you did this? Was there another way of handling the situation? Are you satisfied with the results? What were you trying to achieve? What alternative was possible?

Question. Is it hard for a Hispanic starting a business to get capital from the banks?

Yes. Those immigrants who start businesses usually obtain funds from their families, including extended families, who have jobs and pool their money. They don't really know how to go about raising money any other way. Getting capital from banks is hard! They have no experience with or knowledge of banking, and no trust to hand over their money. They are afraid of being seen going into a bank - afraid the government will take their money away. Money is kept hidden. On the other hand, there is an initial bias against them by bankers.

Question. Are immigrants returning home in this economic climate?

Alicia did not know.

Question. Do you know whether or not employment conditions for Hispanics in this area tend to be exploitative?

Alicia knows nothing specific about this, but understands that if the worker is illegal, or if he fears retaliation, he will be afraid to protest unfair labor practices. If he is legal, he has resources for protest, but may be afraid of being fired.

Question. What immigrant family issues do you see related to the education of their school age children?

Parents are concerned with education, but they don't know how schools work and how parents could help. Parental involvement in their children's education is limited. Both parents work. Many have little or no education.

Question. We seem to have a high pregnancy rate among immigrant high school girls. Is that part of Hispanic culture?

Alicia does not believe it, but does not have evidence. To reduce the number of teenage pregnancies, youth need help to develop an alternative life focus.

Blakeney: Ruby is an advocate for small business. Her office has materials, handouts. She cited *Words for Work*, a Small Business Program which focuses on language training for jobs. Small Business generates \leq \$3 million. She believes companies should be doing cultural training, as well as training young people in internships.

About Hispanic workers: Yes, there is exploitation of Hispanics. They get charged \$150 to fill free forms in the Business Office. Immigrants are in menial jobs, low wages, no benefits, work no one else will do. "We are making less than the minimum wage," they complain. There is fear of retaliation if workers complain about pay or working conditions. An example of the consequences for the worker: A man painting a house fell off a ladder, and couldn't go to the hospital because he had no money. These are conditions the next generation will *not* accept.

SOCIAL SERVICES John Lamb and Judy Williams, both from County Dept. of Social Services, were questioned by Myrna Siegel, Committee member.

Question. "What are the main kinds of help immigrants seek from DSS? Is English a problem for your clients? How do you deal with it?"

Williams: The kind of help we provide includes Medical Assistance, Emergency Assistance, Child Care, Food Stamps, and Cash Assistance. A documented immigrant has to have been here five years in order to qualify as a permanent resident. Children under 18 are not allowed to interpret. The immigrants do not know the federal regulations. If a person is an emergency, we send the person to emergency services, whether or not the person meets eligibility criteria. We don't single out, but if a person is illegal, there are no benefits.

Lamb: Every program we have, people must apply to. We are held to federal and state regulations. They change all the time. Such frequent changes in the regulations are a challenge to the social services staff as well as the clients. The regulations are very complicated. The

Department hires bilingual translators to help, it also maintains language links both by telephone and internet.

Myrna : If people are in doubt about whether to get benefits, they are told to apply anyway. The Organization of Hispanic and Latino Americans (OHLA) is often helpful to immigrants in this application process. OHLA has an Anne Arundel County branch, located at 80 West Street, Annapolis; its Executive Director and only staff member is Joyce Masterson. OHLA does social services.

Blakeney: Hispanics and Latinos are not the same thing. Hispanics include people from Spain or other Spanish-speaking countries. Latinos are Spanish-speaking people from the Americas.

Finney: Labels are bad.

Blakeney, Zoppi & Finney: Labels should be done away with, labels are counter-productive.

Nelson: Am I hearing from everyone that there is too much regulation?

Finney: Not just for Hispanics, blacks too. Many regulations do not promote family. They can be divisive, and the regulations can be complicated. In some cases, undocumented residents can pay some taxes with a number, but it's not good for anything else. The ID number is not a social security number.

Blakeney: We need a credit union for Hispanics. Right now they don't understand about banks. They send money home and then walk around with money in their pockets. Easily robbed.

CONCLUDING QUESTION TO THE PANEL What would you most like to see happen that would improve immigrants' lives and integration into the non-immigrant community?

EVELYN STEIN More health services. A system which provides health care for all.

FAYE ANDERSON Hospitals not asking people if they are legal. Resources are so limited, we need other health organizations to open up their doors and add out-patient services. More clinics in the community. People should be able to pay on a sliding scale, but that is not easy to access. Hospitals are very expensive.

HELLEVI FLORES Education of immigrants in the community. Teach, even in Spanish language, how to integrate here: need information about laws and social traditions; about education, housing, work, health care; that we can get things without paying. We can advocate for them. They have a place here.

PATRICIA AGHALY Let others (non-immigrants) know who we really are. Some Latinos have a very rich culture: work, food, music which we give to this country. We are honest. US needs to learn about and like Latinos.

IRENE ZOPPI We need people to be in positions of leadership here. Now it is hard to get good jobs; we're not taken. People who are spiritual should be leaders.

TONY VALESQUEZ There are people who do things because they want to, and others because it is their job. Motivation is critical. Immigrants should learn the language, the culture and learn the system. And not because they are asked to, but because otherwise they will fear, will run away, be afraid of us. Police and schools need more facilitators.

FRANKLIN HORSTMAN The League of Women Voters could advocate for strengthening good laws and getting rid of bad. E.g., *No Child Left Behind* is up for revision. LWV, please advocate for some revisions.

CARLESA FINNEY The underserved are invariably poor. Alternative services are blocked by bureaucracies, eligibility requirements and regulations that often inadvertently systematically create incentives to maintain dysfunction. I believe we need more groups and individuals to organize to review the laws and practices and then advocate for change. Bureaucracies can be a real problem and a challenge for families to overcome. LWV should study barriers to integration, and find ways to reduce those barriers.

RUBY SINGLETON BLAKENEY We are all Americans and underline that in all you do.

LT. WILLIAM POWELL Explain to people that you have been here, paid your taxes, and should be eligible for citizenship. I recommend forgiveness, and the awarding of legal status.

JOE HUDSON Acknowledge problems, e.g., with ITN (Individual Tax Number), even the undocumented worker pays taxes, but receives no benefits. There has to be an awareness of our traditions, increased understanding on both/all sides. Need Forums to discuss/explore cultural sensitivity and biases.

JUDY WILLIAMS Need to increase awareness of existing barriers. We need advocacy for all immigrants, not just Hispanics.

JOHN LAMB We can't change the laws. They need to learn the system. Educate them to what to expect when they get here. We want to help, but we are limited in offering assistance.